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Drawing Through A Linear Temperament

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DRAWING THROUGH A LINEAR TEMPERAMENT

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

DRAWING THROUGH A LINEAR TEMPERAMENT

By Jorge Miguel Benitez, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

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I am a draftsman, painter and printmaker. This first person statement is a written extension of the art that constitutes my thesis. It discusses the links between my work and the Enlightenment, Humanism, Catholicism, ethics and the Western canon as well as my use of perspective and other classical techniques in relation to history, language, high art, popular culture, propaganda, contemporary upheavals, Christian and Islamic Fundamentalism, globalization and the digital revolution. Furthermore, the main arguments draw upon my Cuban origin and European ancestry, the Cuban Revolution, my Belgian early education and eventual American hybrid identity. The overriding theme,

however, concerns the continuing relevance of drawing, high art and history. As such, it forms a personal art theory and critique of contemporary culture. Supporting sources include history, art history, art theory, philosophy, science, religion and politics.

Chapter 1

A Classical Spirit

When Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel he included the sibyls, female pagan prophets who supposedly anticipated the coming of Christianity. The depiction of the pagan sibyls in an otherwise Biblical narrative, and their acceptance by the Holy See, reflect a spirit that eludes twenty-first century religious fundamentalist comprehension. Michelangelo's pictorial tour de force expressed a Christian Humanist philosophy that, for a very brief moment in Western history, reconciled Europe's Classical foundations with its Judaic mystic legacy.

It was a marriage of two investigative traditions rooted in the moral questions of existence: How does man know and define himself? What is his relationship to other humans? What constitutes a good life? Why does man exist?

Although these questions could not, in good conscience, be phrased in such an excessively masculine way today, they nonetheless represent a profound advance in human thought and moral development that marks the individual woman or man as the maker of a destiny with consequences beyond the self. From Moses to Christ, from Socrates to Plato and Aristotle, and from Epictetus to Marcus Aurelius, the question was always the same:

What is man's duty to himself and thus to the rest of humanity? The ancients, regardless of their religious beliefs, could not separate freedom from responsibility. If morality demanded the existence of God, then ethics demanded the acknowledgment of consequences as a springboard to empathy. Therein lay the essence of responsibility.

For me, a humanist in the Renaissance understanding of the term, the Judeo-Christian-Classical questions constitute a starting point that transcends faith and religion. I am Catholic as well as catholic; that is to say, a product of Judeo-Hellenic philosophy as well as someone who holds a universal outlook. These are not contradictory terms. Nor are they necessarily religious in the conventional sense. I am neither interested in divine rewards and punishments nor in salvation. In fact, my communion with God does not even require His existence. It matters only that I use my art, my meager gifts and, above all, the benefits of a privileged life in a world of unrelenting misery, for something greater than self-expression or self-aggrandizement. My need for a voice and a reasonably comfortable existence must always be tempered by the great ethical questions that form my Western inheritance. In that classical spirit, this document constitutes a humble and imperfect effort by a man—a would-be artist—for whom a good life is one of duty, and art making is both prayer and atonement.

Chapter 2

The Hand, Eye and Pencil at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

In the popular *Terminator* science fiction action films sentient computers attempt to destroy humanity. The self-aware machines view humans, and biology in general, as an evolutionary dead end—a cosmic anachronism. Hollywood never intended the series as a profound philosophical statement, although it serves as a cautionary tale as old as *Genesis* and certainly Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The creation that turns on its creator is a recurring theme in literature because it draws upon the fears of every parent who knows that its progeny is destined to go its own way. The Oedipal tale haunts anyone who gives birth, either biologically or through pencil and paper.

For me, the *Terminator* series serves as an allegory, albeit of questionable quality. As we humans become more and more dependent upon our machines, we surrender the skills that allowed us to survive for millennia. We no longer memorize poetry. We seldom rely on mnemonic devices because the data we need to recall is a click away. We do not remember landmarks or any other information essential to land navigation because we rely on the Global Positioning System. We cannot perform simple arithmetic functions either mentally or with pencil and paper. We cannot write in cursive or even hold a pencil or pen correctly. We cannot draw from observation because we have deluded ourselves into believing that photography rendered mimesis obsolete. The surrender to the machine

in order to achieve an easy, painless existence counters the ancient understanding that pain is essential to memory.[1] Consequently, our collective tribal knowledge slowly disappears as we forget how vulnerable we are to a catastrophic collapse initiated by miscalculations in Tehran or Washington or brought about by diminishing resources or even the callousness of nature.

Computers are neutral. We determine whether to use them wisely or irresponsibly. They comprise a legitimate new tool in the artist's paint box. Like any traditional art-making tools, digital media depends upon the artist's sensitivity, skill, conceptual strengths and vision. Furthermore, art, unlike technology, is not subject to obsolescence. Therefore, digital media serves as an adjunct to traditional media and genres without replacing them. Still, such a powerful technology poses challenges that ought to be considered by anyone who is serious about art.

In light of our evolutionary development, it would be foolish to reject computers. We are a species defined by our ability to extend ourselves synthetically. We wear clothing to compensate for our lack fur. Eyeglasses allow us to see clearly well into years when failing eyesight would have made us vulnerable to predators on the African savannah. All our inventions, tools, and devices are little more than efforts to project ourselves into a harsh environment where we could never survive in the raw. In this respect the computer is no different from the wheel, a flint-tipped spear or a backstrap loom. Yet there is a crucial difference that separates the computer from all previous

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) 61.

inventions—a difference so profound and all encompassing that it challenges our aesthetic, philosophical and religious notions and questions what it means to be human. All prior inventions required intimate contact with their makers and users. The computer is the only product born of human minds and hands with the potential to evolve into a living, self-aware, self-replicating, non-biological species. At present it remains an extension of humans. Within the next hundred years it may become an independent being.

I make images by observing the world and filtering the information through the eyes, the hand and the imagination. I work in the plastic arts. I am an artisan who crafts illusions from simple materials in order to make abstract ideas visible. Yet these days I have a responsibility to define and justify myself in reference to our technological offspring. It is not without merit to ask, "why not make it digitally?"

Those of us who work mostly in traditional media owe it to ourselves, to our colleagues and to our audience to answer that question honestly if imperfectly. Even if the answer proves inadequate for some, the attempt forces a level of consideration that may lead to a deeper understanding of the choices. No question or idea, no matter how distasteful, can ever be dismissed without the risk of falling into arrogant self-confidence and delusions. In my case, it is essential to question the things I love most, be they color, graphite or the handmade mark.

From a practical standpoint there is no reason to work by hand in order to make art as precise as mine. Then again, there is no practical reason to make art at all. The argument could even be extended to the realms of history, literature, music, religion and philosophy. Applied science alone should suffice if existence were the only goal.

A human being, however, is made human precisely by the seemingly useless and impractical. Our physical workings may be reduced to biomechanics, but the incomprehensible complexity that defines the whole remains an almost mystical conundrum. Even if science were to break the code and expose life in exclusively physical terms, it would probably fail to account for the need to engage in something more than the pursuit of food and reproduction. At this point I must defer to the scientists and allow them to address the issue in a manner appropriate to their specific disciplines. I can only speak as an artist. As such I must confess my ignorance and rely upon an intuitive understanding tainted by wishful thinking. Perhaps there is a purely evolutionary reason for the need to make art. I cannot answer that. I can say, however, that, under the circumstances, the need to work by hand must be accepted as one of those benign caprices that defy logic and make art an irrational delight. A rational being must know when to surrender to the incomprehensible in order to remain balanced. My work may appear to be mathematically precise, but I know and joyfully accept that the world of aesthetics remains beyond the reach of mathematical formulas. Technology is progressive. Art is not.

A drawing or painting is above all a visual entity, a carrier of concrete information that defies the symbolic reductions essential to speech. Regardless of its narrative content, conceptual motivation, mimetic qualities, non-objective intentions or theoretical basis, a drawing exists as a reservoir and transmitter of pure visual information untainted, until processed by a double-sided brain, by word-based interpretation. Thus a drawing demands silence and defies, to the frustration of anyone who can speak, the noisy and delusion-

laden world of words. Unfortunately, the silence seldom lasts. A flood of word-based questions soon intrudes: What is it? What does it mean? What does it say?

The ability to accept the drawing on its terms, without symbolic thought and interpretation, is almost impossible for a species defined by speech. If I am an image-making animal, I am also an animal who speaks, reads and writes. Under the circumstances there is something paradoxical, if not ironic, about the construction of a written thesis in defense of visual explorations. Yet it is entirely appropriate for someone, such as I, who revels in words even as he fears and distrusts them.

For the representational draftsman the problem is exacerbated by the visual illusion that automatically calls for labels. The viewer cannot be expected to deny the existence of an image of a coffee pot in a still life by being told to forget the item and concentrate on the work's formal qualities. Both the painter and the viewer must accept the illusion of the coffee pot and its accompanying labels. The best that both parties can expect is a compromise between word and image. Only after such an understanding is reached can the retinal experience assert itself, but always only under the vigilance of words.

Because we humans cannot separate the concrete from the symbolic, it is impossible to keep the visual in a pure state. The non-objective painter is probably the most truly visual artist imaginable, but the attainment of such a pure state defies the human need for external content. The best non-representational painters understand this and use paint in a manner akin to a composer's understanding of major and minor keys. Such painters make the paint sing and speak. But contrary to theoretical explanations, the paint is not the content. The content is found in the emotional and intellectual responses the

paint elicits. That alone separates great abstract painting from decoration in the same way that it separates great representational painting from imitation.

In Greenberg's Shadow

The question of words in the visual world is further complicated by the fact that those who speak and write about art do not always understand the artists or their work. Such art historians, theoreticians and critics may be well intentioned, but their personal agendas and ideologies can do a disservice to the very people they champion. The case of Clement Greenberg sheds light upon the issue. Greenberg, a brilliant and consummate writer and lover of words, failed to take into account the workings of the human mind in his calls for pure non-objectivity. By giving equal status to all forms of representation in the modern era and equating them with illustration and even kitsch he committed one of the most damaging blunders of any twentieth-century theoretician—a mistake of such depth and impact that even after post-Greenbergian postmodernism entered middle age it lingers as a pedagogical approach to art that invalidates mimetic skill as a philistine, beaux arts holdover. His commitment to Marxist teleology was inhuman and ultimately untenable. However, in his heart Greenberg knew the truth, even if he could not bring

himself to always articulate it publicly. In an excerpt from a talk delivered at an "unknown venue" in the early 1960s Greenberg said:[2]

> Lest anybody misunderstand me and think that I myself hold a brief for pure or 'formalistic' painting as such, let me say that I wish it were otherwise. The actual record of its achievement is what alone makes the case and brief for pure painting or what's called that. My own wishful preferences count for nothing here, or anywhere else in art. If it were up to me, the major painting of our time would go back to the Corot of the late 1830s and early 1840s—that is, to a species of photographic naturalism. If it were up to me the greatest art since Corot would have continued to be naturalistic. But art, and especially major art, keeps on evolving and changing; it makes itself known precisely by its never coming to terms with you, but instead, by always compelling you to come to terms with it.[3]

"Wishful preference" is to a large degree the stuff of conscience. To deny personal taste due to a false objectivity drawn from nineteenth-century notions of progress is the aesthetic equivalent of an officer who claims to be following orders when caught committing a massacre. There is no such thing as empirical criticism in art. Nor is the notion of "major art" something that can be sustained outside of an egocentric context. Good, major or even stellar art thrives on dialogue not "by always compelling you to come to terms with it."

Furthermore, what exactly was the "achievement" to which Greenberg referred? Was it the death of easel painting? Was it the emergence of the United States as an artistic powerhouse from the ruins of Europe? Was it the further alienation of the audience from an art comprehensible only to a few? Clearly, if Greenberg's statement is to be accepted as

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[2] James Meyer, introduction, "Pop Art," by Clement Greenberg *Artforum* Oct. 2004: 51

truthful, he believed in the achievement only as an illustration of progress. It is a serious indictment of the New York School to say that if it were up to him, "the major painting of our time would go back to the Corot of the late 1830s and early 1840s." What would Pollock have said had he known the truth about his biggest booster?

Greenberg was, of course, correct in saying that art changes—it does not, however, "evolve." Evolution may not imply biological progress, but it does imply social and philosophical advancement. The Greenbergian concept of progress and evolution also implies obsolescence. That which came before cannot possibly be as good as that which replaced it. It is truly ironic that the man who made his career writing for the *Partisan Review* should have had so much in common with Madison Avenue. "New and improved" is a phrase that expresses the overriding justification of consumerism. Unfortunately for Greenberg, art does not work toward an end of history. The artists he championed and at times abused understood this intuitively and refused to be caged by a theory monger. Greenberg's secular eschatology is poorly suited to people who, by their very nature, think and act in a circular manner.

For me the issue is not representation versus abstraction, but the non-progressive continuum. Today's art is not better than yesterday's art and tomorrow's will not be better than today's. I am heavily influenced by the twentieth century's non-objective canon, and my brand of representational illusionism does not stand in opposition to it. On the contrary, I work in humble acknowledgement of the best non-objective painters of the last sixty years, and I borrow heavily from their achievements. During my time in graduate

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[3] Clement Greenberg, "Pop Art," *Artforum* Oct. 2004: 55.

school I had the privilege to study under Javier Tapia and the late Morris Yarowsky, two abstract painters and first-rate thinkers. Their help and mentorship disproves the inflexible Greenbergian model. I am a better representational artist thanks to the guidance of two wonderful non-representational artists.

If, as I stated earlier, I fear and mistrust words, it is only because I recognize their power and importance as well as their integral role in complementing the visual aspects of the human experience. Only when one outweighs the other does the resulting imbalance produce an aesthetic neurosis. For this reason alone I find it necessary to comment on Clement Greenberg.

But I also owe Clement Greenberg a large debt, and I must, of course, accept that I live in his shadow. How can I not? His writing is always lucid, concise and stylistically elegant. Greenberg's delivery is rational even when his ideas are not. It is impossible to hate a man with powerful convictions who lived in a time when convictions were often all a man could own. At the very least he stood for something. His beliefs were unequivocal and unqualified by "sort of."

Greenberg was a socialist at a time when Marxism appeared to offer the only counterweight to fascist growth and lethality. Yet he never hesitated to condemn communism's failings or Stalin's excesses when other American intellectuals held their tongues and pens and acted as apologists for something every bit as evil as Nazism. He was a humanist as well as a puritan, and often he proclaimed insightful truths such as:

> No Culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.[4]

Those words are even truer today than they were when he wrote them in 1939.

Art, Kitsch and Folkish Dangers

Whatever his faults, Greenberg was not a nihilist. His obsession with progress in art may have been a perversion of Enlightenment rationalism, but it was nonetheless superior to postmodern nonchalance disguised as freedom. For all of his flaws, errors and pious hypocrisies he stood for reverence and continuity rather than flip dismissal and negation. His thinking was supremely historical. The artists he championed made art with every ounce of their bodies and minds through sweat, self-doubt and despair rather than through appropriation. They and Greenberg were not cynics. They were too passionate to be cool. Ultimately, they were no match for a near-albino sphinx who gave the impression of feeling nothing and correctly predicted the triumph of an empty consumerist existence. With prescience and wit Warhol demonstrated that in a society dominated by money the

[4] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), essay in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) 8.

sublime can never hope to defeat the vulgar. Yet Greenberg too would prove prophetic. In 1939 he wrote:

> Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagogy. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries as it is everywhere else.[5]

If Greenberg were alive today he would witness the phenomenon he described in 1939 manifested in the fusion of popular culture and partisan politics that defines contemporary patriotism. The Homeland's official style is demagogic and fraught with latent brutality hiding in the velvet glove of sentimentality. It speaks with a folksy twang in order to disguise its power and patrician origins. But unlike its European ancestors from the 1930s, the new American Homeland kitsch is never monolithic. On the contrary, it is as diverse as the people who consume it under the assumption that the choices offered at the mall prove the democratic nature of the system that affords them the freedom to become physically and spiritually obese. To be free is to consume. To consume is to love the Homeland.

If the Nazis had been a little less race-obsessed and a little more concerned with the relationship between consumerism and profits, they may have won the war. A fat, contented Third Reich may have successfully seduced a continent hungry for the joys of an

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[5] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), essay in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) 19.

all-you-can-eat buffet. Of course, consumer-driven authoritarianism could only be invented in the land of Disney and the perpetual smiley face. Still, the Nazis tried their best when they held the first European book burning in modern times in Berlin on the night of May 10, 1933. No less a figure than Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich's propaganda minister, presided over the event. As the fire was lit, a student stated that they must burn any book "which acts subversively on our future or strikes at the root of German thought, the German home and the driving forces of our people."[6] A similar utterance could easily be made today in Kansas, South Carolina or South Dakota concerning the American home and "the driving forces of our people." Overt hate speech is seldom as dangerous as euphemisms. Can anyone argue against the American home?

Artists, in particular, should beware of the links between the promulgation of folkish values and the persecution and destruction of high art and its makers. The twentieth century taught me to question any pronouncement made in the name of the people by governments, the private sector, religious institutions and purveyors of popular culture. More often than not popular culture is innocuous at best and annoying at worst. Occasionally, however, popular culture and ideas merge with demagogic populism to produce mass hysteria disguised as democratic will. Such was the case in the 1930s, and such may be the case today in many parts of the world including the United States. As technologies as powerful as the Internet, cellular phones and iPods spread, the double-edged sword of communicative freedom and control assumes an unpredictable authority.

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[6] William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) 241.

The same tools that disseminate alternative viewpoints also impose conformity. The line between freedom and repression becomes blurred as "American Idol" and Wal-Mart grant the illusion of aesthetic and economic choice while subjugating the individual to the will of the herd.[7] Information goes hand in hand with misinformation, although the phenomenon is as old as Gutenberg's press and should not be surprising. History can certainly be rewritten through analog technologies, but only with expense and difficulty. Revisionism is cheap, easy and fast in the digital age.

Such is the climate in which I draw; and such is the climate that informs my life, actions, content and work. My art stems from the frightful conditions of an era and society too self-absorbed and dulled by food, entertainment and serotonin inhibitors to grasp its own tragedy. I address what I consider to be decadence with the understanding that high art may be an anachronism. But if that is indeed the case, then all the more reason to work, as I shall describe, in a retrograde manner invested in the hand and a host of obsolete skills—all the more reason to write in cursive. If nothing else, it may keep the terminator at bay—at least for a while. In the end, I am very much a creature of my time but with a keen and distrustful eye toward the conditions that define it and could very well destroy my world and me.

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[7] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) 403.

Chapter 3

Linear Perspective and the Western Experience

Since September 11, 2001, I have sought a more mature and ethically grounded approach to multiculturalism. The March 11, 2004, Madrid bombings as well as the murder of Theo van Gogh and the July 7, 2005, London bombings made me question postmodern relativism and its inability to confront and condemn homicidal medievalism. In one of those painful paradoxes that inform tragedy, the preservation of freedom sometimes demands intolerance. In terms of the twenty-first century's global multicultural reality, this means that social harmony among disparate groups may call for a reexamination of what a liberal, secular society can tolerate from citizens who despise it. Should a Western society tolerate honor killings or female genital mutilation in the name of religious freedom or multicultural expression? Should the press be censored, women oppressed or sexual minorities persecuted because a religious minority demands it? Should the beliefs of a few be allowed to curtail scientific or artistic investigations? These questions led me to reexamine claims of Western criminality by ancient, well-established cultures. Osama bin Laden opened my eyes to the fact that European misdeeds were only a leaf in a forest of human cruelty. No race, culture, nation, ideology or faith is exempt

from millennia of accumulated injustices. Today's victim or freedom fighter is often tomorrow's tyrant.

Osama bin Laden gave me a wonderful gift. He placed Western guilt in the larger context of human guilt. He allowed me to rediscover the visual language of the Renaissance—the much-maligned culture of what Amelia Jones disparagingly calls the "Western patriarchy"[8]—as a source of content, a tool for pictorial expression and a means of critical articulation. In the face of Islamic flatness and iconoclasm, linear perspective, with all of its cultural and historical connotations, became very pertinent, civilized and liberating.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Professor Jared Diamond argues that European hegemony since the late Middle Ages owed more to the continent's location within the great Eurasian landmass than to European brilliance. Access to a greater variety of crops, animals and mineral resources, as well as cultural and technological cross-fertilization with the Middle East and Asia granted the Europeans advantages that the isolated peoples of the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa lacked. Professor Diamond makes a compelling historical, social and moral argument—in effect, Europeans were not superior to anyone else—they just happened to be at the right place at the right time.[9] Materially and morally I agree with him. But I believe that he missed a conceptual element that begins with the ancient Greek understanding of the individual.

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[8] Amelia Jones, "Body" *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 254.

[9] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999) 9-156.

In spite of the collapse of Classical Rome and a few centuries of less than pleasant circumstances, Europe could not forget its taste of individual worth and dignity. The Greek philosophical seeds that held the idea were kept safe in scattered monasteries, Byzantium and in the Muslim World. When Europe finally reclaimed them around the time of Dante they germinated in ways that defy a purely material explanation. In strictly economic and technological terms, the Chinese should have sailed to Europe, not the other way around. [10] The development of perspective is above all an expression of a philosophical outlook that, for good or ill, allowed the Europeans to march forward at a time when more advanced cultures chose to turn inward and stagnate.

It is one thing to fall behind due to wars, imposed injustices or natural disasters. It is something else entirely to fall behind by choice. Such was the case throughout the Middle East shortly after Gutenberg's invention. The Muslim World knew about the printing press but refused to adopt it on religious grounds. It condemned itself to centuries of ignorance.[11] Although perspective does not rank in importance with printing, the question of choice is central to its understanding in the larger Western context. The choice to adopt it signaled a conceptual break from the medieval mindset from which much of the Muslim patriarchy has yet to escape.

Linear perspective is unintuitive. Its early development and codification by Brunelleschi and Alberti in the first half of the fifteenth century resulted from empirically

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[10] Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983) 186-201.
[11] Ibid., 543-547.

based experimentation and geometric extrapolation.[12] In its final form, a well-executed perspective image provides a highly believable illusion. It gives a natural impression. Yet the process by which the image is achieved is far from natural and demands the suspension of a commonsensical visual understanding by the artist. Perspective fools the artist more than it fools the viewer.

As with many lies, perspective stems from a quest for truth that takes it into a philosophical dilemma: how does the artist reconcile the ontological aspects of his perception with its phenomenological manifestations? In other words, why does the sidewalk appear shorter than its width when, in fact, it is ten times longer than it is wide? Why does it look like a trapezoid when it is actually a rectangle? Where is the truth?

Perception and optics run counter to mathematical certainty, yet they both exist on the same factual plane, and the artist must choose between two competing truths. Should the sidewalk be depicted as it is or as it appears? Most children choose the former. In a reversal of Renaissance ideas of progress, the modernists deliberately, and with considerable philosophical sophistication, chose the path of the child. Truth demanded literalness and any depiction of the world dictated a schematic rather than an illusionistic method. This quest for truth eventually led to the abandonment of external references and the adoption of a totally self-referential approach by the late modernists.[13] Painting about painting appeared to solve the problem of pictorial truth forever much as the triumph of

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[12] Frederick Hart, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (New Jersey, New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc. and Abrams, Inc., 1973) 194.

[13] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), essay in *Art and Culture*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961) 6.

dialectical materialism would achieve the workers' paradise and put an end to history. As postmodernism demonstrated, however, both history and external references refused to die.

Paradoxically, the specialized, self-referential approach that marks much modern thought runs counter to the actions that made the modern world. The Age of Exploration, an era philosophically and scientifically tied to the development of perspective, came about in opposition to common sense, literalness and specialization. The willingness to set sail into the unknown armed only with empirical data drawn from the use of instruments that defied what was understood as rational required a shift in the European consciousness that reverberates in contemporary American debate. Just as many Europeans once believed that men would burn to death as they reached the equator, many educated, reasonable Americans believe that humanity could not possibly have evolved from single-celled organisms.

The list of common sense, self-evident truths appears endless. Yet these truths run counter to scientific evidence and experiential proof. Where does that leave the artist? Art, of course, is not science. Art is not subject to a burden of proof. Still, art cannot help reflecting the spirit of its era even if the surface appearance of a piece says otherwise. Nearly one hundred years after its execution, the connection between Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and Albert Einstein's *General Theory of Relativity* seems obvious. Picasso, however, was completely ignorant of Einstein's work when he painted his Cubist masterpiece, and Einstein denied any link between relativity and art. [14]

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[14] Leonard Shlain, *Art and Physics* (New York: William Morrow, 1991) 198-201.

Picasso made visible, through intuitive means, an abstract scientific theory without being aware of his achievement. For him, the development of Cubism was a logical extension of aesthetic ideas that had been gestating since Jacques Louis David's frieze-like *Oath of the Horatii* and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' anatomically distorted *Grande Odalisque*. The road toward pictorial flatness, distortion and spatial warping was already old when Picasso, adding to Cezanne's return to the importance of form and drawing, began experimenting with the depiction of multiple viewpoints captured in an instant on a single plane. Picasso's ignorance of Einstein's ideas, however, does not suggest that his breakthrough was entirely coincidental or even disconnected from the spirit of the times. Relativity was in the air even if the word, along with Einstein's theory, was absent from the discourse. Something similar, yet even more radical, happened during the Renaissance.

Linear perspective is too often discussed in a purely aesthetic context, reduced to an important but nonetheless questionable development designed to satisfy a taste for clever illusions. While there is no doubt that the quest for mimetic satisfaction played a role in perspective's development, it was by no means the only motivation and certainly not the most significant one. Linear perspective stems from and reflects the humanist spirit that informed the Renaissance. More importantly, it synthesizes direct observation, empirically derived data, mathematics, optics and aesthetics into a system that facilitates accurate depictions of the world as well as the making of illusions drawn purely from the imagination.

Perspective's believability blurs the line between the real and the non-real while leaving the viewer with a sense of the possible. If the nativity was spiritually believable in a medieval painting, then it was physically palpable in a High Renaissance depiction. The theological and philosophical consequences of such a visual game were not unimportant. It was one thing to experience the divine on its terms and something radically different to grasp it as a flesh and blood possibility. If the unseen realm of God could be made real, then what could be done with things closer to earth? For a would-be explorer or natural philosopher in the mid 1400s such a question had substantial implications: What exactly lies beyond the horizon? Does Africa have and end and is it possible to sail around it? Can Asia be reached by sailing west?

Eventually the questions became bolder and more dangerous and flew in the face of the Classical canon and Church doctrine. When Copernicus, whom Martin Luther called an "upstart astrologer," proposed his heliocentric system, the discipline that would eventually be called science entered the heretical arena, and as anyone living in twenty-first century Kansas knows, it is still there.[15] Perspective did not inspire Copernicus; but, as in the case of Einstein and Picasso centuries later, perspective coincided nicely with an understanding of the physical world that would shatter dogma in much the same way that artists had defied medieval flatness and transformed Christ into an Italian youth. As such, perspective transcended its origins as a means of depicting pictorial depth and became a metaphor for depth in all aspects of a Western experience that would soon unleash

[15]Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983) 302.

unprecedented religious violence and, in the process, nearly lose its faith. The little Florentine experiment that transposed three-dimensional reality to the picture plane would prove to be far more than a clever parlor trick.

Chapter 4

From Appropriation to Perspective

Since my undergraduate days I have wrestled with the question of what it means to work representationally in the age of photography, film and television. If mimesis were representation's only purpose, then would it not be easier to take a photograph and be done with it? Although postmodernism appeared to have settled the issue by declaring all approaches valid, the question remained problematic for anyone who took the modernist critique seriously. Representation had to be more than mere mimetic skill. It had to justify itself as means of delivering information that balanced content and form. It had to say something about the human condition that could not be said any other way. A well-made illusion was simply not enough.

Like many of my contemporaries I turned to photographic sources in order to get around the problem. Since photographs were flat, using them as sources would not violate the picture plane's integrity. I knew that some of the first generation photorealists made abstract claims for their highly illusionistic paintings; and for them, at least, the theoretical

justifications worked.[16] The situation was not that simple for a second- or third-generation would-be photorealist.

What had begun as an all-too-clever answer to the question of representation in the postmodern era became a cheap way to avoid classical skills. I had no legitimate theoretical reason for working from photographs or other appropriated images. Even worse, my work reflected a Pop sensibility developed by default rather than conviction. The ease and speed of appropriation seduced me, and by imperceptible degrees I metamorphosed into a skilled human photocopying machine. The resulting work was rich in content and appearance, but it left me feeling empty.

Shortly after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing I began painting guns. I worked from photographs and became very adept at depicting metallic surfaces with all their interplays of light and dark and rich, layered colors. The expanded scale of the September 11, 2001, attacks motivated me to seek new ways of addressing the links between weaponry and violent fanaticism. As more and more experts spoke about the inevitability of nuclear terrorism, I looked toward nuclear detonations as a subject. Naturally, I was aware that the bomb was a cliché. But clichés usually achieve their status due to some level of resonance. There had to be a way to paint nuclear explosions that bypassed the clichés.

Some of the gun paintings measured seven feet. A painting of an explosion on a similar scale would have been little more than a statement of the obvious—a big canvas of

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[16] Robert Storr, *Chuck Close* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998) 43.

a big subject. I had never enjoyed working on a large scale, and now I had a subject that appeared tailor-made for a huge scale. In spite of my respect and admiration for Chuck Close, I was not interested in becoming the Chuck Close of nuclear explosions. I found the solution in the intimacy of a highly reduced scale.

Small paintings force the viewer to approach the canvas. They are closer to poems and short stories than to novels. If the content is intimate or gentle, then there is a risk that the work may be maudlin. But if the content is threatening or disturbing, then those qualities become heightened by the subterfuge of the small. Such works assume a viral quality that counters all expectations of a big death by big means. I was determined to depict the explosions' obvious beauty through meticulously painted small canvasses that invited viewers to look at what they might otherwise reject.

The small paintings of nuclear explosions reinforced the importance of craftsmanship. After hearing viewers say that they hated the paintings but could not stop looking at them, I learned that technical excellence had a power that transcended superficial slickness and virtuosity. Well-crafted small paintings could deliver bitter pills. By late 2003 I was ready to abandon photographic sources and explore the method that made possible my current work and will probably keep me engaged for the rest of my life. I would soon find an even more elegant way to provide unpleasant information.

When Talks Collapse, 2003, oil on canvas, 12" x 12"

In the aftermath of al Qaeda's attacks there was much discussion about their political, religious and social motivations. Artists even made works addressing the event. Still, something remained unsaid. As I listened to the pundits discuss the attacks' meaning, I noticed that no one wished to probe the connection between Islamic culture's visual expressions and its homicidal iconoclasm in spite of the fact that the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, begun in 1998, was well documented.[17] I concluded that the issue was too delicate for Western Europeans and Americans under pressure from an increasingly puritanical religious Right and secular Left. It was all right to condemn terrorism; but feelings of victimization and cultural entitlement among ethnic minorities, evangelicals, men's rights organizations, feminists, sexual minorities, conservative moralists and liberal reformers made it almost impossible to criticize Islamist assaults against art. Politically-correct Western censorship in the name of social justice and inclusion nullified the debate necessary to analyze the Islamic world's fall from the heights

[17]Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) 68, 76.

of civilization into failure and frustration. A Western society that feared tasteless pop lyrics or depictions of the nude in art was in no position to point an accusing finger at Middle Eastern transgressions. Furthermore, Islamic cultural intransigence was above reproach in light of the growing American taste for a Fundamentalist Christian theocracy.

Rather than fight contemporary hypocrisy, I decided to make it work for me. I would not criticize Islam. Instead I sought ways to fuse its outward appearance with that of the West. By combining Western and Islamic architectural elements in a classically executed perspective drawing I could comment on the failings of both cultures while reinvigorating a neglected Western technique. I would satirize the situation, but I would not mock the process by which I drew it.

After learning to develop perspective drawings from floor plans according to pre-computer architectural practice, I was able to invent increasingly complex spatial situations. However, I soon ran into a critical challenge. I was often asked why I drew by hand from floor plans instead of resorting to computer-assisted design, better known as CAD. My answer was twofold. CAD is highly efficient. It allows architects and engineers to alter three-dimensional views quickly, an important factor in a field where accuracy and cost effectiveness are paramount. On the other hand, I wanted to slow down the process and prove that the mind, eye and hand could still do what was considered either obsolete or impossible.

The second part of the answer dealt with the relatively low budget of al Qaeda's attacks. I was fascinated by the fact that the United States spent billions on military technology yet could neither anticipate nor stop al Qaeda's actions. Nor can expensive

hardware alone defeat the Iraqi insurgency, destroy the Taliban or neutralize al Qaeda. The notion that money and gadgetry could solve all problems struck me as absurd. Therefore, my refusal to use CAD served as a conceptual protest against the excessive national reliance on technology.

Of course, from an aesthetic point of view a handmade drawing, no matter how precise, possesses a quality unlike anything made by a machine. Oddly enough, I use computers for the execution of elevations, flat architectural drawings of façades. The computer lets me develop complex patterns based on Middle Eastern motifs, but I confess that while I embrace the results, I find the process tedious and confining. Even a large computer screen cannot compete with the freedom of standing and walking around a drawing table.

A perspective drawing's complexities are humbling to say the least. That often-frustrating quality adds to the pleasure of the work. The process requires patience, discipline and a level of concentration unpopular in the age of attention deficit disorders. One miscalculation can ruin hours or even days of work. There is almost no room for error, and intuition can only be indulged at the initial conceptual stage. The process determines the rules by which the drawing must be made. Creativity is limited to the choice of subject, its complexity and the angle at which it will be depicted. Throughout, the ego must surrender to the rules without complaint or willful outbursts of expression. In this respect, a perspective drawing is not unlike a John Cage composition determined by aleatory means. Like chance, perspective operates on its own internal logic, and the artist

must get out of the way in order for it to succeed.[18] I delight in knowing that I must relinquish control in order to achieve a controlled look.

In spite of my representational approach, I am sometimes more of a modernist than a postmodernist. In his discussion of the modernist critique Danto wrote:

> The other response, articulated by Roger Fry, was that the artists were no longer concerned to imitate but give objective expression to the feelings reality elicited in them: "*Peindre non la chose mais l'effet qu'elle produit*," as Stephan Mallarmé wrote in a phrase that continued to have a great deal of meaning for modernist abstractionist such as Robert Motherwell.[19]

Although I draw *la chose*—the thing—the effect it produces elicits feelings that transcend it. For one thing, the depicted object does not exist. It is not drawn from nature. Yes, the picture's illusionism makes the object believable. But the believability results from an abstract geometric process that redefines the picture plane and pulls the viewer into a conversation with both flatness and suggested depth. The "elicited" feelings result as much from the work's formal qualities as they do from its external content. The content, of course, could not exist without the chief formal aspect, namely perspective. Thus the pictorial tools and the content, the result of the illusion, cannot happen without one another. Even if the so-called content is unfamiliar, the illusion is always present. Perspective will not allow another outcome. As a result, abstraction and representation

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[18]Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1968) 105-107.

[19]Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 65.

exist on the same plane in a dialectical relationship that synthesizes meaning and interpretation. In a classically modernist manner, the content and the means are one.

Of course, it would be dishonest to imply that the work has no external content, or that it functions in a strictly formal manner. The illusions, as I argued in chapter II, cannot be denied. They suggest labels, meanings, narratives and feelings that function independently from form. Nonetheless, it is true that with perspective the form defines most of the content.

For the viewer, the results can be simultaneously pleasing and disconcerting. I am often asked where I photographed the particular buildings in a drawing. The viewer wants to believe the illusion and, in true twenty-first fashion, cannot accept that it was generated without technology. The depicted object seems real; therefore, it must have come from a photographic source. Perspective's self-defining nature runs counter to the current culture of pastiche where everything must be derived from something else.[20] In a reversal of William Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature*,[21] the pencil of artificiality asserts itself with an illusionistic power popularly attributed to photographs.

If the drawings' self-defining formalism keeps them in the modernist arena, then their mocking external content plants them firmly in postmodernism. *Victory in Iraq Triumphal Arch, Crawford, Texas* blends neoclassical and Middle Eastern architectural

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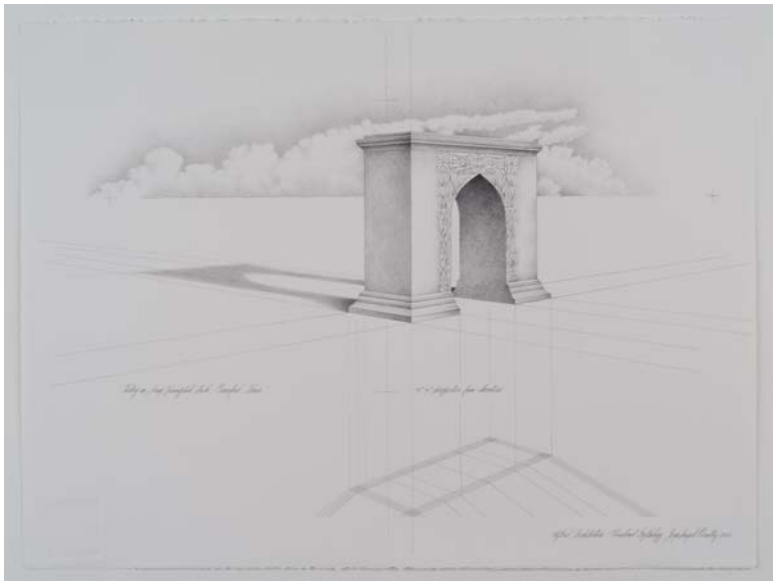
[20] Frederic Jameson "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998) 130-131.

[21] Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982) 43.

elements in a single structure placed in the middle of an empty field. The triumphal arch parodies both styles. It is ironic. The process by which it was made is not.



Victory in Iraq Triumphal Arch, Crawford, Texas, 2004, graphite on Arches watercolor paper, 22" x 30"

Parody and irony can exist without appropriation. When I began my investigation into perspective, I established a set of very strict rules. I could not look at any photographic or computer generated sources. Nor could I copy existing buildings or interiors. Landscape elements could only be based on the imagination or direct observation from nature. I will eventually introduce figures into the environments, but they too must be drawn from direct observation.

These rules form the counterweight to the ironic subjects. They force me to work slowly and painstakingly. They turn the studio into a laboratory for geometrically-based empirical investigations. As in any scientific experiment, if the conditions at the start remain constant, then the outcome should be predictable. This superficially inartistic

approach links me to Uccello, Della Francesca and Da Vinci as well as to nineteenth-century beaux-arts architectural draftsmen. In addition, I borrow from twentieth-century architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, whose drawings often have the presence of stand-alone art pieces that unite a Japanese design sensibility with Western two-point perspective.

Conceptually, politically and art historically these self-imposed rules function as a protest against Islamic iconoclasm and Western techno-worship. Although I reject neither Islamic art nor modern technology, I cannot accept the imposition of anti-representational strictures or the unquestioning embrace of superfluous gadgetry. Flat, non-representational art made as a result of an interest in pictorial and aesthetic issues is perfectly legitimate. But flatness and abstraction mandated by religious interpretation symbolizes flat thinking across all sectors of a culture. It is unbalanced and unhealthful. Flat thinking shackles women and contributes to the theocratic outlook that keeps the Middle East in poverty and fear. It produces unjustifiable anger and gives birth to suicide bombers.

The same holds true for the uncritical American acceptance of technologies that serve mostly to generate profits for the manufacturers. Are we a smarter, healthier, wiser people thanks to our cable channels and large-screen televisions? Are we more contented and at peace because of DVD players in our SUVs? Do college students learn better thanks to the interruption of cellular phones in the classroom? Are we better citizens and more conscientious voters as a result of instant messaging? Does the ease with which we can plagiarize images from the Internet make us better artists? I leave the answers to the reader's conscience.

There is no doubt that technology can improve the quality of life or that Islamic art can rise to the sublime. The beauty of the Alhambra and the Taj Mahal is unquestionable. A superficial reading of the last two paragraphs could impart a Luddite or anti-Islamic impression, while nothing could be further from the truth. But just as Muslims have a responsibility to question their traditions if they are to participate fully in the emerging global civilization, Westerners must question their own technological fundamentalism before blindly chasing after the latest electronic promise of paradise.

Tourists at the Temple to Family Values, 2004, graphite on Arches watercolor, 11" x 30"

I have twice violated my rules since the start of the series. *Tourists at the Temple to Family Values* was drawn from a photograph of a maquette I built in late 2004, and the tourists were drawn from a photograph I took in Williamsburg, Virginia. The trees, however, were completely invented. The finished drawing is both romantic and surreal. But although it works well when shown with the non-photo-based drawings and delivers

the same ironic and subversive punch, it retains the photograph's artificiality. While the perspective drawings are truly synthetic, they appear more believable, a quality that may be due to their more abstract nature.

The Sword of the Prophet Iranian Orbital Bomber, 2005, graphite, gouache and acrylic on Arches watercolor, 11" x 30"

The second violation occurred in a drawing titled *The Sword of the Prophet Iranian Orbital Bomber*. The piece was based on a photograph of a maquette of a space shuttle-like craft. I drew it at a time when my perspective skills were not sufficiently developed to tackle the maquette's odd angle. I have since solved the technical difficulties and have no further need of resorting to photographs for similar pictorial solutions.

The challenges I encountered in that particular drawing demonstrate the continued importance of technique in the development of concept and form. Although technique is often dismissed as something akin to artisanal tedium, its relevance to the successful execution of ideas cannot be overlooked. True, it should not be an end in itself. But the artist who lacks technical mastery is not unlike an illiterate novelist whose marvelous ideas will never be placed on paper. We tend to forget that masters such as Pollock and de Kooning were technical experts in their own unorthodox ways. Can surfaces as perfect as

those of Ad Reinhardt's black painting be executed without technical prowess? Technical excellence is, above all, essential to true spontaneity. Like the gymnast who appears weightless during an Olympic trial, the loose, spontaneous painter achieves freedom through mastery of the medium. Such freedom can only be achieved through discipline.

Of course, one glance at my drawings reveals that I am neither loose nor spontaneous. As Morris Yarowsky once told me, "So you're tight—be tight." True spontaneity is conceptual, not physical. More recently Javier Tapia reminded me that I am not an expressionist. It was not a criticism but a statement of fact. Professor Tapia along with Professors Tisserat and Morrison analyzed the importance of precise line in my work. The line, in spite of its mechanical execution, is the expressive element. It carries much more than descriptive information. It reveals meaning and feeling. It is no accident that I feel much closer to contemporary printmakers and non-representational painters than to any other artists. Non-representational painters understand the pictorial in its purest terms while printmakers marry that understanding to the rigors of their chosen medium. Both are highly disciplined in their respective ways.

The line is also autobiographical, although I would not expect anyone to know that from a casual glance. It refers to my experiences while serving in a 105-millimeter howitzer battery as an assistant forward observer. During that time I learned to call artillery fire on targets that could not be seen by the guns. In order to achieve my mission without having the rounds land upon me, I had to know my position, the battery's position and, of course, the target's position. The Marines in charge of Fire Direction Control made their targeting calculations according to the data I supplied them through the radioman.

Transmissions were kept brief in order to practice not being detected by Soviet forces, our greatest enemy at the time of my service. My tools were a compass, a map and a set of binoculars with a reticle pattern. The Global Positioning System did not yet exist. Mistakes could be fatal.

Artillery triangulation is completely linear and very much related to perspective, land navigation and oceanic navigation. In addition to being an artilleryman, I was a Rifle Expert. That meant that I could fire consistent bulls eyes at ranges measuring up to five hundred yards without the use of telescopic sights. The rifle is a linear weapon. A Marine's relationship to his rifle is similar to that of a samurai to his sword. Without his rifle he is nothing. He must know it and understand it. He must keep it clean and in perfect working order at all times. The M16 is a devastating but delicate precision instrument. The Marine rifleman is responsible for making it an extension of himself. I took my rifle very seriously. While on the rifle range I kept a meticulous data book in which I recorded wind direction, weather conditions, shooting patterns and the position of my front and rear sights. I coordinated my breathing and the squeezing of the trigger with the rise and fall of the rifle. I understood very clearly that my mastery of the weapon could make the difference between success and failure in battle, and I had no intention of betraying my brother Marines through my negligence.

The final autobiographical component that informed my use of line was military drill. Drill is a form of choreography that allows large groups of men to move quickly and precisely as a unit. When performed correctly drill is both artistic and awe-inspiring, a modern reminder of a Macedonian phalanx or a Roman legion. The unit moves

rhythmically in perfect unison. Each foot strikes the deck at the same moment in accordance to the cadence. Every step reflects millennia of precision and discipline and celebrates the difference between a unit and a mob, between honor and purposeless rage.

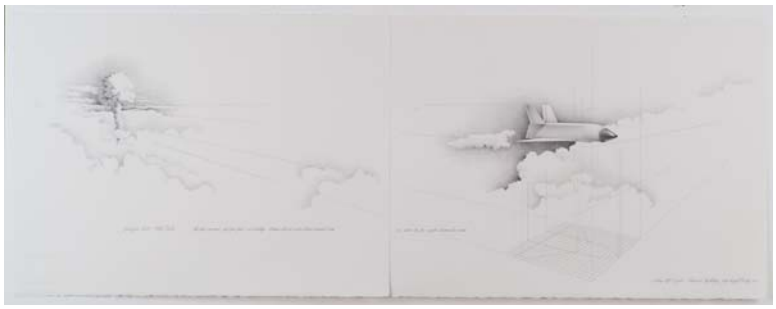
I am not brave. I make no pretense of courage. Nor do I wish to romanticize the military or war. But my ten years of service in the United States Marine Corps remain in my work whether or not I want them there. In many respects I am still a Marine. I relish precision. I draw lines because I am linear in thought as well as action. My preferred sports are running, swimming and cycling, all linear activities. It is no accident that I play the transverse flute, an instrument that allows only a single musical line at a time.

My military experiences feed my content in subtle and informed ways. Unlike the civilian liberal who depicts weaponry without always understanding the subject, I actually know how weapons work. I neither praise nor condemn weaponry. I merely depict it and let it speak for itself. Machines of war are neutral mathematical and engineering constructions built in accordance to the laws of nature. They are not designed arbitrarily, and contrary to popular misconception, missiles are not phallic because men invented them. Weapons are completely amoral and asexual. The passionate pacifist is too often blinded by his hatred of the thing to view it, much less show it, in its fullness. On the other hand, I never depict violence or distort a weapon into a cartoon.

If I draw a rifle, cruise missile or bomber, it is with care and respect. My slow, patient technique dissipates any negative feelings I may have for the subject. I treat the business of war in a business-like manner. But that does not mean that I do not feel the weapon's significance or the evil for which it may be used. On the contrary, the process

by which I draw is physically painful and reminds me with every stroke that the drawing's superficial neutrality is full of latent malevolence. The viewer, however, does not need to know what I feel or experience. I go to great lengths to hide my emotional tracks. Anyone can make an angry drawing. It takes self-restraint to make an elegant drawing of a disturbing subject.

A discussion of the work in terms of form, content and execution is not enough. It should be clear by now that I use perspective in a highly conceptual and philosophical way. It may not be as clear, however, that the work's central theme is ethics or that it sometimes addresses the relationship between art and evil. The hybrid architecture I depict is much more than an illustration of collusion between Western greed and Middle Eastern dysfunction. It is also an indictment of artistic resignation and collaboration by default. The message is not found in the fusion of neoclassical and Islamic elements but in the fact that an architect was willing to combine them on behalf of a client. The drawings transcend mere politics. They are not agitprop and make no claims to changing the world. It would be delusional to assume that they could. No, they are primarily elegant historically based meditations on human corruption. They are not pictures of the present that must be shown while the headlines are fresh. If anything, the drawings will be stronger with the passage of time. The specific events that inform them are not as important as their universality. That aspect is timeless.



Seeking Soft Targets, 2004, graphite on Arches watercolor, 22" x 60"

Many of the drawings, such as *Seeking Soft Targets*, have extensive written descriptions in cursive. Longhand is a dying art that deserves to be preserved for its abstract qualities as well as its ability to deliver information. Cursive's linear and symbolic qualities not only augment the work's meaning but they state that the arts can reinforce one another. Such writing breaks down the barrier between literature and the visual arts. Unfortunately, the integration of word and image disturbs the purists on all sides. In fact, I temporarily abandoned the use of words after facing strong critical objections. Now I realize that I was correct in my initial usage, and since I honored the objections by exploring different avenues, I am now free to return to my original idea. I am stronger for having dealt with the criticism by respecting it, acting upon it and, after realizing its flaws, rejecting it. If the purists had their way, opera never would have been invented.

Beyond the use of cursive in drawings, I write for the sake of investigation and intellectual development. The ability to read English, French and Spanish allows me to do research in the West's three most important languages. Furthermore, I comprehend most of what I read in Italian and Catalan. I would eventually like to learn to read German,

although I doubt that I could ever speak or write it. It is only natural that my love of language should seek a written outlet. Therefore, I have an interest in making books that combine images with fictional accounts of twenty-first century developments. My current unfinished book project is titled *Petrolic Style, American Architecture for an American Millennium*. Petrolic is a word I coined to describe the American obsession with hydrocarbons. Petrolic culture is an oil-based way of life with an ideological foundation drawn from Manifest Destiny and Christian Fundamentalist beliefs. Its main premise is best expressed by a sample from an interview between the book's main characters:

> Mabel Wilson: I want to start with a question about an aspect of your work that is often discussed outside of an architectural context although it is central to both your buildings and your thinking. In fact, you've often spoken in public about it. The topic, of course, is culture—specifically petrolic culture. How would you define it?
>
> Skip Wellington: Petrolic culture is for everyone. It's a cutting-edge celebration of American life through motion and the spiritual benefits of material prosperity. How wonderful is that?
>
> Petrolic culture pushes the envelope in every area of life from transportation to leisure. Just look at the way it transformed the way we live. Who wants to live in a city with all those people close together, and sidewalks and public transportation? The suburbs, on the other hand, they're truly great. Suburban life couldn't have happened without the automobile. And when you think about its benefits, gee, it's mind-boggling. How did families survive before suburbs? I can't imagine life without the single family home with its backyard and barbecue and all those beautiful weekend rituals like lawn mowing and hedge trimming. Suburban life is about privacy and quiet. You get to be alone with your thoughts. The kids have their rooms and their play areas. No one intrudes on anyone else. In many ways it's an extension of the wide-open spaces that define America, except that they've been brought indoors. Can you think of anything more joyful and satisfying than a Saturday afternoon in a recliner watching a ball game on a wall-sized screen while the kids are plugged into their various entertainment devices? Everyone's quiet, no conversations, no bothersome contacts—total independence and self-reliance thanks to a

technology brought about by oil. I mean, the sheer pleasure of eating alone without needing anyone to cook or serve or even clean up—think about it, what could be better than prepackaged foods kept fresh in plastic? And the flavors—gosh, those great flavors that only modern chemistry could concoct. Can a French chef make anything as delicious as the foods invented by our artificial flavor specialists? No, of course not, and it's because of oil. Oil made this country the marvel that it is today. People don't think about that enough. They use it without giving thanks for it. Petrolic culture is our way of life. It's what makes us Americans. It's about getting your license at sixteen, and it's about high school football and sock hops and proms and corsages and burgers and milkshakes and boys and girls and moral values and rights of passage that build strong men and women and families. And you know what, it's about doing things big and going places in the biggest, loudest, fastest vehicle that the law allows and money can buy. It's about consuming as much as we want whenever we want. I believe in that with all my heart and soul, and I'm willing to fight and die defending it if I have to. In the end it's about the freedom to shop and own things, and that's what America's all about.

MW: I know that for you petrolic culture also has a deep spiritual component. Could you elaborate on that?

SW: Gosh, yes. Oil is a sacred thing. It's a gift from God. I don't understand how anyone can deny that. The Lord put the oil in the ground so that someday we Americans, His people, could use it to carry out His will. It's also His way of saying that we're anointed; after all, isn't oil the instrument of anointment? I see it as something very unambiguous, and it should be to anyone with the brains and the courage to see the truth.

MW: Do you find it difficult to be associated with a cultural term that has a pejorative origin?

SW: Not at all—as you know, the term petrolic came from the title of Peter Waldheim's anti-American book the *Petrolic Behemoth*. He claimed that "America's addiction to oil," was destabilizing the world and hurling it toward a cataclysm. In fact, he went so far as to call the 1991 Gulf War and the eventual liberation of Iraq the First and Second Petroleum Wars. It was meant as an insult to American resolve and honor, but it didn't work. You see, in spite of his hateful intentions, he was right, although for the wrong reasons. We do owe our existence to oil, so why not admit it proudly. I'm proud to be a citizen of a "petrolic behemoth," and I'm equally proud that my nation is willing to fight for oil. Besides, people of

faith are supposed to turn their enemies' insults into professions of conviction.

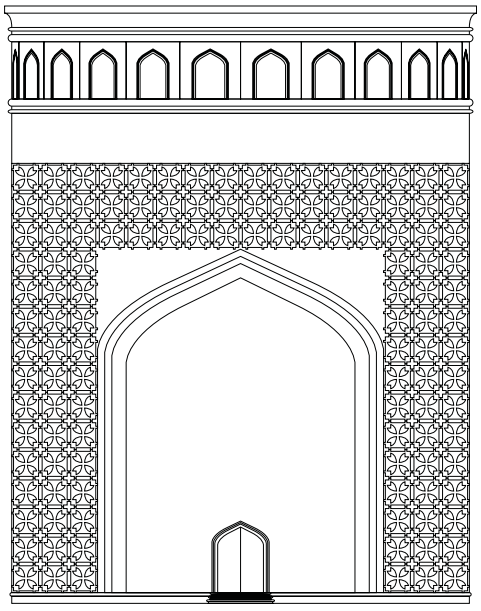
MW: I've never understood why Peter Waldheim didn't understand us better. I am curious, however, as to why Middle Eastern elements play such an important role in petrolic architecture when we import less than twenty percent of our oil from the region. Wouldn't a purely American architectural language be better suited to express our petrolic nature?

SW: Yes and no—for example, we could design in accordance to the pioneering work of Louis Sullivan or even Frank Lloyd Wright, but while they reflected our industrial and technological energy, they never fully expressed the American totality. They never captured our predestined richness and complexity or our spiritual depth. Wright, in spite of his undeniable genius, is especially problematic because of his flirtations with Japan and, of course his Unitarian leanings. Nineteenth century Emersonian liberalism is an aberration in an otherwise completely faith-based continuum. So you see, it's hard to find what anyone would call a purely American vocabulary. On the other hand, the Middle East is the birthplace of our faith. The region's two other religions are wrong in their inability to accept our Savior, but they are nonetheless religions of the Book. We all share common spiritual roots. We believe in one God, and His law is supreme. These are abstract, word-based faiths that embrace laws and concepts as perfect expressions of a divinely inspired intellect. The eyes deceive us, but the Word is always true. For the architect this poses some unusual challenges. I do think it's possible to reveal the Word through the eyes without resorting to distorted appeals to the imagination. In architecture that means finding a way to integrate form, function and what some might call decoration into a seamless whole. If the resulting building is true to itself, it will be true to the Word. In that respect the Middle East offers some beautiful solutions in keeping with our values. Yes, the oil is exceedingly important, but in the long run it's about values, and what better place to start is there than the Holy Land?…

The book is not an explanation of the visual work. Although all my work is conceptually and thematically related, the book project does not reinforce the paintings and drawings in any way. It stands alone as an independent satirical work of art with the potential to exist in many forms including a website and a series of performance pieces

based on lectures about the benefits of petrolic living. Most of all, this project satisfies my fascination with well-crafted conceptual and performance art and allows me to work with digital media without compromising my loyalty to the handmade mark.

Graduate school gave me the opportunity to rekindle my interest in printmaking. Thanks to generous technical help and critical insights from Professors Morrison and Tisserat I have been able to initiate a series of printmaking projects currently at different levels of completion. They range from hand-drawn stone lithography and digitally-drawn lithographs to Adobe Illustrator™ images that will be digitally printed. Printmaking is a natural extension of drawing, and the possibilities offered by combining traditional processes with digital media are especially compelling. I cannot predict where these approaches will take me, but I can say with confidence that I will never run out of possibilities.



Adobe Illustrator™ image of *Thatcher House, the Anglo-American Imperial Society*, 2006

As I complete this chapter and transition into the conclusion I must revisit the importance of writing outside of a visual context. Universities were intended to educate in a holistic manner in order to provide their graduates with a universal outlook grounded in critical thinking. The ability to discuss theoretical issues orally and on paper is central to the task and separates the intellectual from the dilettante. In that respect, graduate school gave me a chance to work with rich, complex theoretical ideas. I had the privilege of studying art and critical theory under the late Morris Yarowsky. I cannot do justice to the quality and depth of his intellect or to the brilliance he shared with his students. Professor Yarowsky encouraged me to explore, discuss and write. I will always be grateful to him for that gift. I believe that artists must write, not only to advance the discourse, but to purge themselves of others' aesthetic musings. Jorge Luis Borges eloquently offers a beautiful explanation of the latter:

> Whenever I have dipped into a book of aesthetics, I have had an uncomfortable feeling that I was reading the works of astronomers who never looked at the stars. I mean that they were writing about poetry as if poetry were a task, and not what it really is: a passion and a joy.[22]

I look at the stars.

[22] Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) 2.

Chapter 5

History, Tragedy and the Making of a Civilized Man

Art is, above all, a reflection of the artist's humanity, or lack thereof. After all the theories, art historical citations and attempts at scholarly justification have been exhausted there remains the person who must somehow muster the courage to face the studio knowing full well that the odds are against both private and public success, and that the work, should it even meet the artist's expectations, will probably linger in obscurity until time and humidity reduce it to nothing. Yet the compulsion to make art never goes away, at least for some. In my case, a reconnection with my European heritage served as the catalyst that pulled me from a sterile life in business back to art. Without an understanding of my European experiences and influences, the art is incomplete.

In October 1998 I visited Paris after a thirty-two-year absence from Europe. It was a weeklong business trip spent mostly at a trade show in the Paris suburbs. I stayed at a small, inexpensive hotel on the Left Bank not far from the Boulevard de Montparnasse, a busy and very Parisian thoroughfare devoid of the Champs Elysées tourist-pleasing pretensions. Prior to the trip, my friends warned me not to have high expectations. They feared that I had romanticized Europe and the French, and that I would suffer a devastating

disappointment once the place failed to live up to my childhood recollections. For a moment I almost believed them.

At Dulles Airport I waited to board a late afternoon direct flight to Paris. The scene was a cliché, one of those beautiful fall days without humidity that put everything in sharp focus with Technicolor brilliance. Even the temperature was perfect. As I waited to board the Air France 747, I noticed the bands of the French tricolor on the aircraft's tail. That in itself meant nothing, except that the blue band contained a radical surprise that defied the French Republic's jealously guarded independence and nationalism. Embedded in that deep republican blue sat a circle of gold stars—the stars of the European Union. I stared transfixed by a meaning I knew well. Those stars went beyond anything their boosters and critics could proclaim. They signaled the union of the Latins, Celts, Franks, Goths, Teutons, Slavs, Magyars, Hellenes and all the other European tribal families that Rome and Christianity tried and failed to unite.

I witnessed the early days of what would evolve into the European Union. I saw the Benelux and the Common Market in their infancy. Of course, I was too young to understand their significance; but I was a good student of history, and I knew that Western Europe had tasted unity and peace during the Pax Romana, and that German and Latin alike had not forgotten the taste. I carry both bloodlines.

Once I boarded the plane, I switched to French, my second language and, more importantly, the language in which I learned to read, write and pray. If, as my friends feared, France were destined to disappoint me, then at least it would not be for lack of effort on my part. After landing and leaving the airport with all its modern, international

sameness, I entered Paris and saw before me the architecture, light and color I remembered from my childhood. Nothing had changed.

That evening, jet lagged and tired, I walked around the city, and on the wall of a bank I saw a brass plaque that marked the spot where a "hero of the Resistance" had been killed during the liberation of Paris in 1944. That understated plaque blindsided me at a vulnerable moment. Already high strung from a flood of memories provoked by my return to Europe I fought back tears as I read the plaque and thought about all the people I knew who had survived the Nazi occupation. The stories came back—first-hand accounts of hunger, terror, shootings, reprisals, concentration camps and disappearances. I knew the ordinary people who had experienced the war and the Nazis, and I also knew some who had experienced World War I, the cataclysm that set in motion a series of events that would change my native Cuba forever. The 1917 Russian Revolution, itself a product of the Great War, reached the New World in full force in 1959. I was linked to World War I in a sinister symmetry that defied distance, climate, culture, language and reason. Wilhelm II and Vladimir Ilich Lenin were players in my life. They were part of the reason I was an expatriate Cuban. I was in Paris reading a plaque about a fallen resistance fighter because of them. They made me.

History, revolution and the Cold War shaped my childhood. Since 1914 humanity has lived in a state of unremitting anxiety. After August 6, 1945, the anxiety metamorphosed into the very real possibility that humanity could self-destruct. The same anxieties that informed Abstract Expressionist angst inform my work. Although my processes and the final appearance are very different from those of the great non-

representational masters, the existential concerns stem from nearly identical historical sources and fears.

History imparts an appreciation of consequences to those wise enough not to wish to experience them firsthand. It provides precedents that illustrate the price of hubris and self-righteous miscalculations. Thanks to history it is not necessary to invade Russia in order to grasp that such an adventure would probably be fatal. The experiences of Napoleon and Hitler suffice for the lesson to work. Unfortunately, the current American intellectual climate is decidedly anti-historical. Relevance is measured in seconds, not centuries or millennia. The positivism that served this great nation so well is in danger of becoming an excuse for denial. In the face of global warming, a costly war, diminishing resources, environmental degradation and domestic corruption, the question always seems to be, "What does that have to do with me?" A student of history would know the answer. An artist cannot afford not to know it.

The twentieth century was the bloodiest in history. Most of the bloodshed was perfectly avoidable. Perhaps nothing illustrates the ideological and gratuitous nature of the century's barbarity than an event that set the stage for future depravities. On August 25, 1914, less than a month into World War I, the German Army, under orders from Berlin, set fire to Louvain, a medieval Belgian city with no strategic value. I visited Louvain often as a child. It had an ancient university with a library that contained 230,000 volumes, among them 750 medieval manuscripts and more than 1,000 early printed books. According to King Albert of Belgium "inferiority and jealousy" motivated German actions. "These people are envious, unbalanced and ill-tempered," said the king. "They burned the library

of Louvain simply because it was unique and universally admired." King Albert sought a psychological explanation. The truth was colder. It stemmed from a theory of political terror formalized by the nineteenth-century Prussian military thinker Karl von Clausewitz. Terror was necessary because success in war demanded the destruction of the enemy's "total material and intellectual resources."[23]

The Germans, of course, merely wrote the theme. Others would play the variations with as much vigor and greater mendacity. The destruction of culture meant the complete destruction of a people's memory, a lesson that was not lost on Stalin and eventually on Hitler, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and a host of lesser murderers. Even the Allies learned to play the German tune as evidenced by the bombing of Dresden in World War II.[24] Still, terror in the hands of a politician was nothing new. But the adoption of such beliefs by artists marked the twentieth century as something truly unique. Modernism, as the Futurists demonstrated, could easily degenerate into hatred, racism, violence and the pursuit of raw power in the name of art, progress and the state.

Both fascism and Stalinism mixed surprisingly well with the darker aspects of avant-garde thought. Notwithstanding the fact that they were often destroyed by the totalitarian states they helped create, the intellectual and artistic elites were more involved with the revolutionary vanguards of the early twentieth-century than is discussed in 2006.[25]

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[23] Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Ballantine, 1994) 321.

[24] Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) 593.

[25] Elena Kornetchuk, "Soviet Art Under Government Control" *From Gulag to Glasnost*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New York: Thames and Hudson and the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1995) 36-37.

As late as 1938 André Breton co-wrote an artistic revolutionary manifesto with Leon Trotsky,[26] an unrepentant Bolshevik with a homicidal streak as unpleasant as Stalin's.[27] Therefore, it should come as no surprise that artists were often engaged in the savagery. They still are, as evidenced by the case of Gabriel García Márquez. The Colombian Nobel laureate, who by all accounts is not a communist, maintains a close friendship with the totalitarian Fidel Castro, serves as his apologist and has accompanied him to show trials and executions.[28] I can only imagine the magic realism of his unconscionable flirtation.

In 1908 F.T. Marinetti wrote his infamous *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*.[29] Aside from some early twentieth-century anachronisms, much of its language can still be heard in the contemporary critical vocabulary. His calls for daring, risk, action and youthfulness still inform the cult of irresponsibility as artistic expression. He elevated the machine above all else and in the process anticipated the ersatz courage of the modern computer game warriors who inhabit American suburban dens. It is amazing how little has changed since Marinetti wrote:

> 1. We intend to glorify the love of danger, the custom of energy, the strength of daring.

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[26] André Breton and Leon Trotsky, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" (1938), *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968) 483-487.

[27] Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread* (New York: Hyperion, 2002) 54-55.

[28] Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Viaje al Corazón de Cuba* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés Editores, S.A., 1999) 192-193.

[29] F.T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism" *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968) 284.

2. The essential elements of our poetry will be courage, audacity, and revolt.
3. Literature having up to now glorified thoughtful immobility, ecstasy, and slumber, we wish to exalt the aggressive movement, the feverish insomnia, running, the perilous leap, the cuff, and the blow.[30]

In two chillingly prescient points that live in Hip Hop misogyny and arrogance, skinhead nationalism and Right-wing masculinity Marinetti added:

9. We will glorify war—the only true hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchist, the beautiful Ideas which kill, and the scorn of women.
10. We will destroy museums, libraries, and fight against moralism, feminism, and all utilitarian cowardice.[31]

In another passage reminiscent of the 1960s counterculture Marinetti professed the credo that dominates contemporary anarchy and marketing alike:

> The oldest among us are thirty; we have thus at least ten years in which to accomplish our task. When we are forty, let others—younger and more daring men—throw us into the wastepaper basket like useless manuscripts![32]

Energy, youth, violence and death form the core of Marinetti's aesthetic and politics. Aside from the fact that artists no longer issue manifestos, he could have been writing in 2006. It is easy to envision him doing a performance at a gallery in Chicago,

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[30] Ibid., 286.
[31] Ibid., 286.
[32] Ibid., 288.

New York or San Francisco. He was prophetic to a degree that demands closer scrutiny in the age of cell phones, the Internet, the retirement home and the suicide bomber. Sadly, he seems far too relevant to this suicidal era. Warhol falls short by comparison. He failed to mention that the fifteen minutes of fame would end with the celebrity's detonation.

The siren song of youth and revolution lives today among Islamist fanatics and buttoned-down business school free marketers. It echoes through art schools among graffiti-making skateboarders and unwashed self-styled anarchists wearing Che Guevara t-shirts. Fascism, with its love of energy and power remains the dominant theme of our time among groups ranging from Christian and Muslim Fundamentalists to neo-Marxists.

Marinetti wrote his manifesto as if fueled by a twenty-first century energy drink. Its maniacal syntax reflects the arrogance, confidence, pride, energy and masculinity that inform its content. It scorns compassion, reason and knowledge and exults the new. In short, it is a paean to barbarity in progressive drag—the sort of half-baked rumination that can be found on the webpage of a teenager plotting a school shooting. Yet it is included in an anthology of modernist theoretical writings. How can I or anyone else deny its importance when seen in its proper context? After all, the twentieth century was not unlike a teenage murder fantasy. The protagonists may have been older and their means of expression more polished; but their motivations, their megalomaniacal sense of mission and entitlement, their quest for respect, their love of power, their worship of energy and daring were every bit the stuff of teenage daydreams. For its part, the art world cannot hide its role in the drama, especially when it still borrows from its lexicon. Contemporary

anti-intellectualism and its accompanying breakdown of critical articulation appear to vindicate Marinetti. As we approach the Great War's centennial there remains only one question: Will Tehran be the new Sarajevo?

If modernism is understood as a continuation of the Enlightenment, then Marinetti's version was in fact "anti-modernism."[33] Nor was his stance pre-modernist. It lacked a mitigating humanism or piety. Even its selfishness was cowardly and, like much of the postmodern ethos, devoid of the Overman's willingness to accept responsibility.[34] "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism" can be seen as a window into our time—a period when science exists mainly to generate profits for neo-conservatives or weapons for foreign and domestic anti-rationalists.[35] There would never have been a place for me in Marinetti's world, and there may not be a place for me in this new century. I am neither daring nor violent. I am not an anarchist. I love libraries and museums. I am everything that Marinetti despised. Mine is a quiet world; and although I am active, I do not live for action anymore than I live for inaction. Observation, filtration, reflection and commentary form my purpose. Grief over the human condition fuels my vision. Even as a child I could not bear the suffering of others. That is why I seek solace in reason and shun pride and overt strength. I struggle everyday to control my reptilian impulses and the evolutionary curse that places my survival above that of others. I too am proud, and I am ashamed of it.

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[33] Jürgen Habermas "Modernity an Incomplete Project" *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998) 13.

[34] Alphonso Lingis "The Will to Power" *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999) 57.

[35] Jürgen Habermas "Modernity an Incomplete Project" *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998) 9-15.

Perhaps I am a monk too much in love with the secular world to enter the cloister. Ten centuries ago I would have gladly dedicated my life to the illumination of manuscripts.

Art is related to culture, but not necessarily to civilization. It would be a mistake to grant art the power of a conscience or to assume that it can mitigate humanity's baser impulses. According to a Western eyewitness of the March 9, 1945, firebombing of Tokyo that killed over 100,000 people, the Japanese in outlying areas "uttered cries of admiration" at the "grandiose, almost theatrical spectacle."[36] The Japanese response may have been nothing more than a healthy sublimation in the face of death—the aestheticizing of tragedy as a coping mechanism or perhaps a genuine enjoyment of the conflagration's beauty. Whatever their reasons, it would be highly unfair to question their ethics. They were, after all, the victims of the "spectacle." The same cannot be said of Hitler or Stalin who, notwithstanding their propensity for kitsch, could at times demonstrate a keen sensitivity to what is universally considered sublime. Hitler's love of Wagner's operas is well documented.[37]

Stalin's love of music and his appreciation and knowledge of literature are less well known but they are no less legitimate because of his crimes. Unlike Hitler, who fancied himself a mystic sent by Providence to save the Volk, Stalin the atheist Marxist saw himself as a scientist in charge of the great laboratory called dialectical materialism. Like his Nazi archenemy, he too had his sensitive artistic side. Stalin loved the theater and had

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[36]Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) 599.

[37]William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) 101.

a prodigious knowledge of literature. Biographer Simon Sebag Montefiore called him "the best-read ruler of Russia from Catherine the Great to Vladimir Putin."[38] Obviously none of these attributes kept him from butchering millions. Yet could not such a man be called cultured? On the other hand, was he civilized? That, more than anything, is the question that drives postmodern intellectuals to despair disguised as freedom and nonchalance. Freedom born of the existential realization that men such as Hitler and Stalin were indeed cultured is not freedom at all but a pang of desperation. Under the circumstances, civilization, itself an Enlightenment concept, ceases to have meaning because there is a silent understanding that ordinary human beings are at worst potential Stalins or at best appreciative voyeurs like the Japanese observers of the Tokyo firebombing. Did not the collapse of the World Trade Center remind us of a movie? What kind of artistic discourse can sensitive savages undertake? Is it any wonder that nearly one century after Marinetti's manifesto and almost one hundred years of incessant war and death the critical vocabulary appears nearly depleted? It would seem that there is nothing left to say. I refuse to surrender to such a conclusion.

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[38]Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin, the Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005) 96-98.

Chapter 6

Because of Fear and Goodness

"A revolution without firing squads is meaningless."[39] V.I. Lenin

Until a few years ago I never thought about the influence of my unusual life on my work. It was only natural that an unorthodox worldview should result from an unorthodox childhood. What was the big deal?

Shortly before I applied to the graduate program I purchased a catalogue of Vija Celmins' work. The Latvian-born artist intrigued me with her creative range and power. She moved seamlessly from drawing to painting to conceptual art with exquisite taste, craftsmanship and depth. However, until I read her conversation with Chuck Close, I did not appreciate the degree to which her childhood subconsciously shaped her art. In one particularly poignant passage Celmins said, "I generally think of my childhood as being full of excitement and magic, and terror too—bombs, fire, fear, escape—very eventful. It wasn't until I was ten years old and living in the United States that I realized living in fear

[39] Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin, the Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005) 85.

wasn't normal."[40] Suddenly I grasped why her work spoke to me in ways that other artists' works with similar concerns did not. Although understated and totally devoid of self-pity, Celmins understood tragedy. In response to Close's question about the Russian invasion of her house in Latvia, Celmins said:

> There was no place for them to live as they didn't build houses. The communists have a lot of trouble doing simple things. They just moved into our house while my family continued to live there too, but I don't really want to talk about it. What can I say about it? It was an emotional experience. I do regret not having a homeland. I wonder what it would feel like to live your whole life in the same general area where you were born. I imagine that would have been very comforting to me and would have given me a different kind of strength. This is one of my biggest regrets.[41]

Her answer could have been given by any Cuban exile of my generation. Reading Celmins' response made me realize that I would never be able to compartmentalize my work. Everything I make, regardless of content or appearance, is autobiographical. Like Celmins, I live with the exile's pain.

I entered first grade in 1962. My family and I had settled in Liège, Belgium, earlier that year. None of us spoke French, the foods and customs seemed alien, and the climate was dark, cold and wet. Shortly after our arrival in the country we received news that my father's mother had died in Cuba. The telegram gave no details of her death, and my parents incorrectly assumed that the communists had killed her, possibly in retribution for our departure. Later we learned that my grandmother had died while undergoing a routine

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[40]William S. Bartman, ed., *Vija Celmins* (A.R.T. Press, New York, 1992) 20.
[41]Ibid., 23.

operation that was made dangerous only by the adoption of Soviet medicine in Cuba. Perhaps it was true; communism, if not communists, had indeed killed her.

The stress of adapting to new surroundings was merely one more irritant after fear, insecurity and grief. We had no only lost our country, but the revolution, which at first appeared to be a temporary inconvenience, was now entrenched as a permanent fixture of Cold War reality. For us, the facts of modern geopolitics were not topics for abstract conversations among well-heeled news junkies; they were part of my family's reality. They were the reason for our exile, and they would dictate with the unsparing logic of a revolutionary tribunal the terms of our lives no matter how stressful, painful or sad. My parents knew that we could never return home and that, in all probability, we would never see our loved ones again. Still, neither they nor I realized that our education in human suffering was only beginning. Our sorrow was real, but the ways in which it manifested itself as self-pity would wither away as we learned that in the twentieth-century scheme of things we were very fortunate.

My history lessons began in 1960 shortly after I turned four and found myself in Richmond, Virginia, struggling to understand my new surroundings. Why was I torn from my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends? Why was I thrust into a strange city with odd people speaking a funny language? Where were my familiar landmarks? Why could I not go home? These were the questions of a four-year-old boy who was excessively sensitive and attached to his home. As my parents met the other members of Richmond's fledging exile community the questions turned to: Why are the grownups always sad? Why do they weep?

Fear, of course, was already in my system. The infection began before we left Cuba. The shootings, the hushed conversations, the secrecy, the weapons, the uniforms, the ubiquitous images of Fidel, Raúl and Che formed part of the viral mix that would affix itself to my life as if encoded in my DNA. Nearly forty-six years after our departure the fear remains—well disguised, of course, but real if not more subtle and refined for having mutated from a terminal condition into a chronic but manageable annoyance. Between the ages of four and seven that fear nearly killed me. Within two years of our arrival in the United States we found ourselves in Europe adjusting to a new life that, in retrospect, proved to be a remarkable blessing.

In 1962 Europe appeared to have recovered from World War II; but it was only an illusion. On the surface, Belgium gave the impression of being a modern, developed country. The infrastructure worked well. There was no obvious hunger. The cities bore no signs of bombing or occupation. But although located in one of Belgium's largest cities, the classrooms in my school were heated with coal in potbellied stoves, and we wrote with metal quills dipped in nineteenth-century inkwells. The Belgian middle class could barely afford to heat its homes. Anyone who owned even a miniscule plot of land augmented the family diet with homegrown vegetables and potatoes. It was not unusual to see women in their seventies ride bicycles as their primary mode of transportation. Even some priests held part-time jobs as laborers because the Church could not afford to maintain them. Suburbs were almost nonexistent, and as the city gave way to the country it was normal to see men and women in wooden sabots tilling fields by hand. For the average Belgian, life in the early sixties was hard by any measure. Needless to say, these

tough and preoccupied Belgians could not afford to coddle kids from the New World traumatized by something as ordinary as a communist revolution.

There were no French-as-a-second-language programs to ease the transition into a school that taught the alphabet in cursive and in ink. As soon as we could put letters together we began our grammar lessons in a tongue full of the complexities common to Romance languages. By the end of first grade we knew the most common French conjugations by heart and had memorized the multiplication tables through twelve. The grammar and math lessons went hand in hand with a religious education that combined a standard Catholic catechism with the polished humanism of Pope John XXIII. All the while we learned valuable ethical lessons as our teachers stressed a doctrine of salvation through deeds and repeatedly explained that we were fortunate to live in an affluent modern country. Yes, these Belgians, for whom daily life was a struggle, saw themselves as affluent. The school held fundraisers for African relief. The message was clear: we had a responsibility to share what little we had because our lives were held in common. Our individuality meant nothing if removed from the collective human experience. Whatever we did or failed to do had consequences. I learned the lessons so well that only after I had written the preceding sentences did I find a section from Pope John XIII's encyclical *Pacem In Terris* that confirmed them:

> Human society, as We here picture it, demands that men be guided by justice, respect the rights of others and do their duty. It demands, too, that they be animated by such love as will make them feel the needs of others as their own, and induce them to share their goods with others, and to strive in the world to make all men alike heirs to the noblest of intellectual and

> spiritual values. Nor is this enough; for human society thrives on freedom, namely, on the use of means which are consistent with the dignity of its individual members, who, being endowed with reason, assume responsibility for their own actions.[42]

As I struggled to simultaneously learn a new language along with my lessons I had to confront panic attacks compounded by exhaustion resulting from insomnia. Bedtime was a collage of nightmares about Cuba, our exile and the fear that something could happen to my parents that would cause my sister and me to be abandoned in a strange land. I was keenly aware of my family's precarious situation. We were citizens of a communist pariah state living in a NATO country a few hundred miles from the Warsaw Pact border. We had no guarantees. One shift of the geopolitical fortunes could kill us or put us in a Soviet concentration camp. My childhood had Nikita Khrushchev instead of Dr. Seuss.

After a while it became obvious that my family and I were not prone to self-destruction. We thrived, in spite of our emotional challenges, and slowly learned to enjoy the gifts that Europe placed before us. We became fluent French speakers without surrendering our precious Spanish. We made Belgian friends, entered their homes, shared their meals and learned the details of their tragedy-laced lives in conversations peppered with existential laughter and cheerful resignation. I had the privilege of meeting people who had experienced some of the greatest and most harrowing events of the twentieth century. My school's assistant administrator, a dapper gray-haired gentleman with impeccable manners, had fought in World War I. Every adult I met had experienced one

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[42] Pope John XXIII (1963). *Pacem In Terris*. Retrieved May 1, 2006, from the Holy See website.

or both of the century's greatest wars. I visited American and British cemeteries and saw seemingly endless rows of white crosses marking fallen youths, some as young as sixteen. All the while, I learned to appreciate the subtleties of French cuisine in an atmosphere charged with history, tradition and surprising joyfulness.

My contact with Belgium's Francophone Walloons strengthened me in ways that were not always apparent. They provided me with a background against which to contrast my family's situation and begin to understand the relative nature of human existence and suffering. They had witnessed horrors and they still laughed. Their humanity was intact and reflected in their abundant generosity and kindness. In spite of ourselves, my family and I were slowly absorbed into the Belgian way of life.

Identity is an odd and fluid thing. We arrived in Belgium as Latins from the New World only to discover that the Walloons regarded themselves as Latins also. Of course, this was due mostly to language and religion. Needless to say, this coincidence worked in my family's favor. Once again, history had intervened to change things in surprising ways. As it turned out there was more to the story than language and religion. The union, through marriage, of the Spanish monarchy with the Austrian Hapsburgs had brought the Low Countries into a Spanish orbit.[43] As the Reformation split Europe apart, Catholic Flanders remained in the Spanish camp while Protestant Holland sought and achieved independence.[44] In effect, the Belgians and my ancestors had all been subjects of the same empire. The Spanish influence was visible in some of Belgium's architecture, and the

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[43]Henry Kamen, *Empire, How Spain Became a World Power 1492-1763* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003) 36-38.

reigning Queen Fabiola had been a Spanish commoner until her marriage to King Baudouin I.

I found the monarchy comforting. Kindly, saintly King Baudouin was a symbol of stability in my topsy-turvy world. I relished attending mass on Fridays with my school and looking at the heraldic banners that hung in the church in honor of the kingdom's noble families. There is nothing glamorous about having been born in a failed state, and Belgium's constitutional monarchy provided an antidote to Cuba's disastrous republicanism. For a child ignorant of politics' finer points Belgium was stable and safe, and that was good enough.

Belgium's short summers meant visits to Louvain, Antwerp, Bruges, Luxembourg and Holland. We could not cross the border into Germany because there were no diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic and Cuba, a member of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Since my parents and I were not yet American citizens, we had to travel with documents from a communist regime. France, less vulnerable than a beleaguered and divided Germany, allowed us to enter the country at will without visas. Meanwhile, it took six months to obtain a visa from Franco's Spain for a visit to Mallorca. The wily fascist dictator had plenty of experience with communists and intended to reduce any threat posed by Cuban visitors. Geopolitical reality made clear who we were and what we could and could not do.

My first genuinely aesthetic experience occurred in Antwerp. That ancient commercial city, symbol of Flemish prosperity and industry, was home to Peter Paul

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[44]Ibid., 317-324

Rubens, the great master of Flemish Baroque sensuality. I can say without exaggeration that Rubens introduced me to art. I loved Antwerp as only a child can love a city. It was big, exciting and elegant. It also had a restaurant that served a poached sole in a white wine cream sauce that was almost mystical. Some of my most cherished memories of Belgium involve meals and restaurants.

My family and I returned to the United States in 1966. We became American citizens. I served in the United States Marine Corps in the seventies and eighties. My sister and I received undergraduate degrees from Virginia schools. We all settled into routines familiar to millions of Americans. I fell in love with my adopted country. I share its triumphs and tragedies with my fellow citizens. I am an American artist; but I cannot forget my origins and the historical events that molded me. I am a most fortunate man who draws and makes art out of fear of the alternative and as an assertion of human goodness and nobility. Art is my amulet against Marinetti and the terminator. It separates me from the reptiles. I do not wish to be merely cultured. I wish to be civilized.

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